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## University of Bath

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## **Embedding management knowledge: repertoires and reservoirs**

Surveys of skills gaps consistently reiterate the importance of management and leadership development in organisational settings for improved productivity (Burgoyne et al., 2004), both within the private and public sectors. Management development is still often delivered through traditional face-to-face 'classroom based' approaches, although mentoring and coaching, blended and e-learning strategies are gaining ground (CIPD, 2010). Despite the ubiquity of management and leadership programmes, and the investment in this area of learning and development, questions remain about the effectiveness of many programmes and interventions in developing management skills and organisational performance (Bolden, 2007). A decision to run a management development programme is therefore often fraught with questions that concern the following topics:

- Using outside expertise or running the programme in-house
- Opting for face-to-face, blended, distance learning or online delivery
- Ensuring that the stated benefits of the programme are realised (and how to evaluate this)
- How to ensure learning is embedded (and how to evaluate this)
- How to ensure participants and the wider organisation see value in the programme

There is a tendency, in the face of some of the uncertainties around effective evaluation, to opt for approaches to management development that are 'tried and tested', or perhaps to opt to commission 'the experts', who, it is hoped, can be trusted to deliver the goods.

Ensuring that management development initiatives achieve stated objectives is a key concern of strategic decision-making regarding management development options. This may focus on practicalities, for example the development of a specification for external providers, guidance for a procurement process or a process for selecting participants. Undoubtedly there is value in these practical steps, but equally there is likely to be value in attempting to take a more conceptual approach to how management 'know-how' forms and circulates within the organisation concerned, and to focus on ways in which this can be promoted within the organisation. In this article an element of the conceptual framework developed by Bernstein (1999) to describe and analyse differing knowledge discourses is discussed and briefly applied to an organisational case study. Bernstein's contribution to Sociology may have considerable use within studies of management education (Mutch, 2002, 2003), but here we aim to focus particularly on his approach to the definition and characterisation of knowledge. The objective is to make use of this mode of analysis to better understand how choice of learning and development interventions can more effectively realise organisational objectives, and to suggest ways in which useful organisational 'know-how' can build and circulate within organisational contexts.

## **Horizontal discourse: application to organisational learning and knowledge development**

Bernstein (1999) provides a language of description which can be used to delineate between different forms of knowledge and processes of knowledge development. While vertical discourse is outlined primarily in its relation to academic disciplines with varying knowledge structures, horizontal discourse is presented as embodying the mechanisms through which knowledge that is rooted in specific contexts arises and is acknowledged as valuable. Bernstein emphasises the 'segmentation' within horizontal discourse, with knowledge relating to a particular activity or tasks developing specifically, in a manner that does not necessarily relate to other 'knowledges' acquired by an individual. He uses the term 'repertoire' to describe the array of differing strategies that an individual who has acquired different knowledges relating to different activities or tasks possesses. In a community, or organisational context, where a collection of individuals has cause to interact or co-operate, there are thus a range of different repertoires, which combine to form a 'reservoir' of

strategies for managing different situations and achieving objectives. In an organisational context we might use the example of a project team or task and finish group, with a range of skills and strategies (or repertoires) developed as a result of various experiences in the workplace, brought together to achieve an objective. They have the opportunity to expand their repertoires and develop a combined reservoir, providing they are able to use mechanisms of 'circulation' and 'exchange' (Bernstein, 1999) that facilitate learning and knowledge development. The existence and effectiveness of these mechanisms within an organisational context may be dependent on the 'expansive' conditions outlined by Fuller and Unwin (2004), or equally on the nature of the productive system that the organisation sits within (Felstead et. al., 2009).

For those interested in promoting organisational learning, and the development and capture of knowledge within an organisation, a number of questions arise from the concept of segmented horizontal discourse, for example:

- To what extent is horizontal discourse, as opposed to the more structured vertical discourse (and its vertical and horizontal knowledge structures) which is often connected with academic or scientific knowledge, an appropriate analogy for management and leadership skills and 'know-how'?
- What implications does this analysis of knowledge and its relation to the individual have for decisions regarding the suitability of learning and development interventions used within organisations?
- How can the processes of 'circulation' and 'exchange' be best enabled so that the 'reservoir' of organisational knowledge can be developed (and used) most effectively?

### **Acquiring segmented knowledge**

Bernstein's discussion proceeds to an analysis of how knowledge is acquired in horizontal discourse, the relevance of segmental pedagogy (of horizontal discourse) and how it contrasts with institutional pedagogies (which relate more to formal curricula). Bernstein (1999) stresses that '*pedagogic practice may vary with the segment*' as processes of knowledge acquisition are specific to the particular context and have not been subject to institutionalised pedagogy. In other words, we might say that people have learnt how to do everyday tasks in different ways, ranging from brushing ones teeth to managing our personal relationships. Crucially, Bernstein theorises that engaging in the learning of a strategy or practice effectively may require the pedagogic approach in use in the earlier process of acquisition. These pedagogic approaches may include modelling, showing, repetition or by more explicit instruction.

For those many managers who are learning how to manage people, delegate, supervise, and deal with power imbalance in organisational contexts without formal instruction, we might surmise that their knowledge development follows processes of acquiring tacit knowledge and strategies (Sanchez, 2005) from their practical experience of, or exposure to, 'know-how' that they seek to deploy using their understanding of the effectiveness of specific knowledge and strategies in given contexts. Strategies for solving problems at work will be practised and re-practised to the degree that they provide solutions that are perceived as successful. Of course, the level of aptitude that individuals possess in the deployment of this knowledge and associated strategies varies, just as their capacity to acquire the knowledge and strategies varies as a function of their own individual ability and the structural context(s) which they have experienced (Felstead et al., 2009). The outcome of these processes at an organisational level is therefore influenced not only by the extent to which those in positions of power and authority have the capacity to acquire and facilitate the development of knowledge and strategies, but also by the awareness that individuals have of the nature of the knowledge and strategies existing or needed within the organisation, and by the

existence of meaningful opportunities to deploy knowledge and strategies. Processes of individual and organisational learning, and their impact on organisational performance, are therefore shaped by the extent of circulation and exchange, and by the construction and ongoing replenishment of the organisational reservoir of knowledge and strategies.

### **Case study: Recognising repertoires through a management development programme**

The case focuses on a local authority directorate in the UK in which almost all of those with some form of managerial responsibility had undertaken very little formal training or development. In most cases this had consisted of one-off workshops focusing on aspects of line management or recruitment. At a strategic level it was recognised that there was both an organisational need for management development and a demand for greater recognition of skills acquired in management practice. In response a learning and development officer was tasked with the development of a management development programme which would lead to an accredited qualification. After considering a series of options, it was decided that a blended programme consisting of the use of online guided reading and tasks combined with regular face to face workshops would be designed. Although the management and delivery of the programme would be in-house, the programme was built around a partnership with an organisation specialising in online learning. The focus of the programme would be around three priority themes, 'Team Management', 'Leadership' and 'Change', which were mapped to relevant units offered by the Chartered Management Institute. Participants would complete written assignments and a presentation to gain a Chartered Management Institute Certificate in Management and Leadership over a six month period. The intention was to deliver a rolling programme of sessions to consecutive cohorts of participants, with numbers in each cohort around 15-20, so that eventually all those with managerial responsibility in the directorate (estimated as in excess of 100) would complete the programme.

A key focus of the programme would be to raise awareness of the 'repertoires' that managers with different levels of experience within cohorts had acquired to deal with challenges at work, and to encourage participants to think of the accumulated repertoires as a 'reservoir' of knowledge and strategies that was available to the organisation. This could be characterised as part of a process of socialisation and gradual externalisation (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). The process was promoted through workshops focused on sharing experiences, analysing case studies and testing and reflecting on management practice. 'Circulation' and 'exchange' of repertoires of strategies for dealing with management challenges was an essential element, with attention paid to the issues of pedagogy alluded to by Bernstein (1999), meaning that participants needed to be able to recognise and communicate not only what they had learnt but also how they had learnt it. This necessitated a process of reflection on how the knowledge and strategies were acquired or developed, in order to prepare to exchange experiences with other participants. As much of this learning had been experiential, sometimes undertaken over prolonged periods, participants primarily focused on narrating their reflections on moments of insight which had improved their management practice. With the aid of training tools such as the Johari Window (Luft, 1982), participants were supported to better understand how they had learnt and developed through their practice.

### **Circulation and exchange: An Associates Development Network**

On recruitment to the management development programme, participants pledged that they would become members of an Associates Development Network (ADN), which was described as a mechanism for sharing knowledge and skills within the organisation. It was made clear that they would need to be prepared to contribute a small amount of time each year to the network, and that they would need to secure agreement for this from their line manager before commencing the management development programme. The ADN would become a vehicle for the further

development of management skills within the organisation, as participants graduating from the management development programme, and therefore schooled in the process of ‘making repertoires visible’ would become responsible for facilitating workshops focused on key themes or ‘strands’ and management skills. The intention was to develop an internal accreditation system which would recognise workshop facilitation, leadership and coaching skills, eventually resulting in a network of accredited associates who would have the skills to co-ordinate learning and development activity, and feel responsible for the network and its success as a consequence of their experience on the management development programme. Once the network was sufficiently robust, change initiatives would also be delivered through the network with new strands emerging to bring together relevant people, consult or disseminate. Additionally, the organisation would be better equipped to respond quickly to poor performance identified, through a learning and development infrastructure owned and led by the combined workforce.

### **Brief outline of progression within the Associates Development Network**

| Associate Level | Experience, skills and behaviours required   | Expectations   |
|-----------------|--|--|
| Senior          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Senior or Middle Management experience</li> <li>-Professionally qualified as a practitioner or manager</li> <li>-Experience of learning and development delivery, coaching, mentoring etc.</li> <li>-Leadership skills and behaviours</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Leadership or co-leadership of a strand of learning and development</li> <li>-A specified time commitment</li> <li>-Mentoring accredited associates</li> <li>-Specifying priorities within the strand informed by the organisational and professional context</li> </ul> |
| Accredited      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Management and leadership experience</li> <li>-Professionally qualified as a practitioner or manager</li> <li>-Some experience of learning and development delivery, coaching, mentoring etc.</li> <li>-Leadership skills and behaviours</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Leadership or co-leadership of activities within a strand of learning and development</li> <li>-A specified time commitment</li> <li>-Mentoring affiliate associates</li> <li>-Shadowing senior associates</li> <li>-Reflection on professional development</li> </ul>   |
| Affiliate       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Developing as a manager and/or leader</li> <li>- Professionally qualified as a practitioner or manager or aspiring to qualification</li> <li>- Interested in gaining more experience of learning and development delivery, coaching, mentoring etc.</li> <li>-Developing Leadership skills and behaviours</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Contribution towards activities within a strand of learning and development</li> <li>-A specified time commitment</li> <li>-Shadowing of accredited associates</li> <li>-Reflection on professional development</li> </ul>   |

The ADN encouraged progression, through initiation as an ‘Affiliate’ and access to the reservoir of organisational knowledge, and progression to an ‘Accredited Associate’ with a responsibility to coach and mentor affiliates in the process of recognising and developing their ‘repertoires’. Progression to accredited status required a level of awareness, both of the repertoires available, and the capacity to perceive opportunities for knowledge and strategies to be deployed for the benefit of the organisation.

In line with Bernstein’s (1999) discussion of effective circulation and exchange processes within horizontal discourse, the ADN would champion approaches to learning that were collaborative, informal and focused on ‘know-how’, using modelling and demonstration, but coupled with an

emphasis on a community of learners with a shared interest in knowing and strategising to find solutions to management problems.

### **Outcomes and learning points**

The management development programme received positive feedback from participants, with most valuing the facilitative and co-operative approach, which was seen as valuing the 'repertoires' they had developed as practising managers. Participants were persuaded by notions of sharing knowledge and strategies to support each other and organisational objectives. However, the Associates Development Network was considerably less successful, due to a lack of organisational will, and insufficient investment in communication of the concept in the implementation phase. Attempts to launch the ADN to a wider audience were also held back by ongoing restructuring and uncertainty within the organisation, meaning that most staff were primarily focused on trying to make sense of change over which they felt they had limited control. Barriers to delivery included:

- Reluctance on the part of the organisation to act sufficiently decisively to ensure the viability of the ADN.
- The lack of recognition at the organisational level leading to equivocation on the part of potential associates. Staff needed clear signals from the wider organisation that they could invest time and effort in this concept
- Wider political and structural change in the context of financial limitations and organisational uncertainty.

In summary, the focus on the notions of 'repertoires' and the development of a 'reservoir' of shared knowledge helped to inform the nature and structure of the management development programme, its ethos and training methodology. A key objective of the programme, and the Associates Development Network, was to provide opportunities to promote the necessary circulation and exchange of repertoires, to encourage participants to identify, and to value, the knowledge and strategies they had developed through management practice, and to stimulate 'exchange' through reflective activities. Although the ADN was not implemented fully, the concept and approach of the management development programme was declared a success, with positive participant feedback and commitments to take the approach demonstrated forward into team workshops and training sessions.

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